

If an atom bomb burst over the Alps

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IF AN ATOM BOMB BURST OVER THE ALPS.

by DEREK MEAKIN.

In the event of atomic warfare ever engulfing Europe the safest place to be in would be a secluded valley in the Swiss Alps.

That is the opinion of men who have been making a close study of this frightening new method of making war ever since the first bomb was dropped over Hiroshima in August, 1945. They say that it is only by putting a mountain between yourself and a bomb that you can really feel safe from its three terrible major effects — blast, flashburn and radiation.

Of course Switzerland would by no means be totally immune from the bomb's destructive powers. Their observations show that in an Alpine region, as elsewhere, a bomb exploding high in the air would be the most dangerous and, if it is in a highly-populated area, damage would be widespread. In the case of a bomb bursting at low level it would affect a much smaller area, but the actual material damage would be more intense.

Forget for a moment the tremendous power unleashed by a hydrogen bomb of the type that has just been undergoing tests in the Pacific. Consider what would happen if one of the more conventional atom bombs, such as the kind now being stockpiled in Britain, burst over the Alps.

Floods. . . avalanches.

First there would be a ball of fire hanging in the air, lighting up the area for miles around with a brilliance never before experienced.

The fiery globe would rise swiftly into the air followed by a multicoloured column of swirling hot gases. Then, when the column stretched many

thousands of feet in the sky it would billow out only to be twisted into fantastic shapes by violent air currents that race high above the Alps.

At the moment of the explosion there would be a dazzling flash of light, a rush of intense heat, and various forms of radioactivity would shoot out in all directions.

On the ground below the terrible effect of the flash and ensuing blast would at first be obscured by a rolling cloud of dust and smoke, especially if it were concentrated in a narrow valley.

The tremendous heat generated by the explosion would melt any snow on nearby mountains causing them to throw up huge clouds of scalding steam. Water, too, would cascade down the mountainsides, swelling little streams into roaring torrents and causing rivers miles away to overflow their banks.

Even glaciers hundreds of feet thick would not be immune. If a glacier happened to be near the centre of an explosion it could be turned into a raging sea. It is a frightening thought to realise that these last relics of the Ice Age, which have survived for so long, could be eradicated in a matter of seconds.

Such is the heat suddenly released that the rise in temperature could cause avalanches over a considerable area.

Dread radioactivity.

If an explosion occurred over a big town blast danger, though formidable, would not be as serious as the effects of heat and radiation.

As most buildings in Switzerland are built of concrete, brick or stone, blast pressure would only be felt to any great degree in the centre of the damaged area where buildings would be liable to collapse or have their roofs crushed in. Slightly further away from the centre there would be a possibility of their being pushed over or distorted.

In Switzerland, where electric power plays such an important part in the country's economy, widespread disorganisation of essential services could be caused by the possible effect of bomb blast on electricity generating and sub stations. All overhead electricity, telephone and telegraph cables, as well as overhead tram, trolleybus and train wires could be affected over a considerable area. Even if rail tracks remained intact, services would most likely be held up by debris, nearby fires and overturned coaches and wagons.

But the greatest danger from an atom bomb attack would be unseen and unfelt — the dread radioactivity which could eventually cause severe shock, sickness, fever, general weakness, internal damage, loss of blood, falling out of hair, and poisoning.

Unlike heat and blast, radioactivity could strike far



The Aletsch glacier — an atom bomb could turn it into a raging sea.

from the scene of the explosion. Radioactive products present in water and mist could spread rapidly and there would be nothing to stop them contaminating persons and objects over an area of many square miles.

There would be a real danger if they entered the body through breathing or by contaminated food, water, pipes or cigarettes.

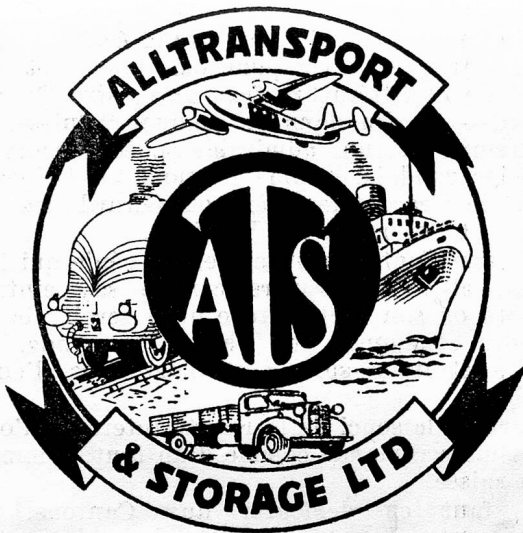
What is most disturbing, say the experts, is that a radioactive particle cannot be destroyed by exposure to atmospheric conditions, heat or chemical treatment. The only thing is for it to decay naturally — and this might take anything from a few seconds to many years, according to the type of element concerned.

Such terrible and frightening facts, however, are already out of date. Today the supreme weapon is the hydrogen bomb. If one of these burst over the Alps the effects of an ordinary atomic explosion described here would seem puny by comparison.

OUR NEXT ISSUE.

Our next issue will be published on Friday, June 11th, 1954.

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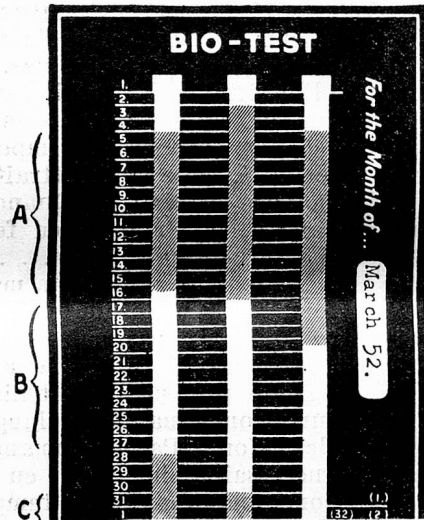
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